

## **Meanings of Employment in the Lives of the Formerly Incarcerated**

We know remarkably little about the varying meanings justice-involved populations assign to their employment experiences, and how those meanings intersect with varying criminal involvement over time. Some perspectives assume that employment and crime are alternative choices that don't easily co-exist, particularly as the individual moves down a pathway towards desistance. Other scholars view employment and income-generating crime as more-or-less interchangeable types of work, with effort allocated over time to that which provides greatest utility. Drawing on in-depth, multi-method interviews with 26 formerly incarcerated men, we find that employment can have multiple meanings, and thus that it can either be distinct from or co-exist with income-generating crime in differing ways. Some individuals see employment as intrinsically incompatible with crime, because they view it either as a way to change their life or as a periodic alternative to criminal involvement. Others, however, combine employment and income-generating criminal involvement precisely because they experience employment as providing complementary and/or offsetting rewards that they cannot obtain through income-generating crime alone. Our findings thus suggest that orientations toward and meanings of employment may be more important for criminal desistance than the mere fact of employment, job quality, or satisfaction.

**Professor Bellair is a Professor of Sociology and Director of Criminal Justice Research Center at The Ohio State University. His current research is focused on the relationship between employment and recidivism, and the relationship between employment or other life changes and desistance from crime among citizens returning to the community from prison. He is also engaged in several other projects, including assessing explanations of race/ethnic differences in violence across neighborhoods and between/within individuals, and studying the violence surge in Columbus, OH.**



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